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Schmidt, Antje ; Katan, Mira ; Sandset, Else Charlotte

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Authors:

Antje Schmidt¹ MD, Mira Katan² MD, MS and Else Charlotte Sandset³ MD on behalf of the European Stroke Organisation Young Stroke Physicians Committee*

Affiliations:

¹ Department of Neurology, University Hospital of Münster, Münster, Germany

² Department of Neurology, University Hospital of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

³ Department of Neurology, Oslo University Hospital - Ullevål, Oslo, Norway

Corresponding author:

Dr. Antje Schmidt, antje.schmidt@ukmuenster.de

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Introduction

In the first years of your career as a stroke physician you are concerned with the patient you thrombolized yesterday and worry if there is an intracerebral hemorrhage on the follow-up scan. Besides, you are concerned with the statistics for the paper your professor has been telling you to write for the past 6 months. While you are doing your best to become an excellent clinical stroke physician and you are trying hard to understand the world of academics, it is difficult to find the time for organizational work. The idea that you, as a trainee, are able to influence global clinical practice and establish an international network may seem unrealistic. However, national and international stroke organizations act as platforms for political influence, collaboration, inspiration, exchange of experiences, networking and career promotion from early on. In the following article, we summarize why it is more than worthwhile to get involved in a stroke organization and we report our own experiences as members of the *European Stroke Organisation (ESO) Young Stroke Physicians (YSP) Committee*.

Get a political voice – become influential

As a career starter, you are fighting at the forefront in the emergency room and you are working directly with all disciplines involved in stroke care. You are exposed to the daily challenges of treating patients. Whether in a tertiary stroke center or in a hospital without a stroke unit, you get to see strengths and weaknesses of the pathways at your institution. Nevertheless, your ability to change basic processes in patient care and in the organization of stroke services in general is probably rather limited. Involvement in a stroke organization, however, gives you a political voice and the opportunity to implement your interests and ideas early on.

Get inspiration for your career as *Clinician Scientist*

Setting up your career as a *Clinician Scientist*, combining clinical work and research, requires strong motivation, self-discipline and endurance. As a career starter, clinical work and life in

a new environment alone are challenging enough. Nonetheless, you head to the lab or read papers instead of going out with friends in your leisure time. When research projects fail, sympathy among colleagues and friends might be limited and you will eventually have doubts about being on the right track. If you are involved in a stroke organization, you will meet many like-minded people at different career stages. You will meet peers, who share your worries and problems, and you will meet those who have successfully tackled the first hurdles as *Clinician Scientists*. Ultimately, you will find successful role models at all levels of the career ladder, who support you and inspire you to progress the started path as a *Clinician Scientist*.

Establish a strong network early on

Involvement in a stroke organization inevitably creates new networks. On the one hand, you will meet experienced stroke researchers, who are capable to give you valuable advice for future projects. On the other hand, you meet colleagues of the same age, who are working on similar projects and with whom you can exchange experiences. You will surely meet a lot of like-minded colleagues, with whom you would like to work together in the future. Engaging in stroke organizations thus enables short-term and long-term collaborations in research projects. Above, the creation of strong networks early in your career facilitates the implementation of multicenter trials in later career stages.

Acquire the latest specialist knowledge

Being involved in stroke organizations early on enhances your career for several reasons, including the acquisition of knowledge during clinical and scientific sessions of conferences, the acquisition of technical skills in workshops, and the exchange of experiences with clinicians and researchers from other countries. If you are on an academic career pathway you probably attend conferences such as *the International Stroke Conference (ISC)* or the *European Stroke Organisation Conference (ESOC)*. Getting involved in a stroke organization will give you the opportunity to participate in programs such as the European Stroke

Organization Summer and Winter Schools where you get into personal contact with leading stroke specialists with wide-ranging expertise. You will always be up to date with the latest research, as the results of large clinical trials will be presented by the principal investigators at large conferences, often before publication in journals. Furthermore, the participation in dedicated skills workshops enables you to acquire new technical skills and establish these skills in your local hospital.

Help to combat the global burden of stroke

The aim to reduce the continuously growing global stroke burden is a strong incentive to engage in stroke organizations early on. According to the recently published Global Burden of Disease 2013 Study, there were almost 25,7 million stroke survivors (71% with ischemic stroke) and 6.5 million deaths (51% from ischemic stroke) from stroke in 2013.¹ Despite the evidence that stroke units reduce complications after stroke² and that intravenous thrombolysis and mechanical thrombectomy represent two highly effective treatments for acute ischemic stroke,³ the global stroke burden has significantly increased.¹ This is mainly due to the fact that these treatments are available only for a minority of stroke patients worldwide, and the difficulties in implementing primary and secondary prevention globally.¹ There are remarkable geographical variations in stroke prevalence and stroke mortality between developed and developing countries. While the prevalence of ischemic stroke is approximately three times higher in developed countries than in developing countries (1,015-1,184 per 100,000 vs. 339 per 100,000), stroke mortality is generally lower in developed countries.¹ Stroke organizations aim to outbalance regional disparities and reduce morbidity and mortality from stroke globally through improvement of organized stroke care and implementation of standardized, evidence-based clinical practice guidelines. For example, with the help of a stroke organization you may be able to perform an internship at a well-established stroke center in order to implement standardized organizational procedures at your institution back home.

Increase stroke awareness also among the younger population

Stroke is not only a disease of old age, and stroke organizations need the input of young stroke physicians to reach out to the younger population in order to increase stroke awareness. The stroke incidence is increasing in young adults and children. According to findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study, 31% of all strokes in 2010 were in young and middle-aged adults (aged < 65 years old) and children.⁴ In fact, the absolute number of childhood strokes has increased by approximately 35% between 1990 and 2013.⁵ The rising stroke incidence in children and young and middle-aged adults requires further attention and improved awareness among health professionals and citizens alike. Better awareness may also promote the adherence to primary prevention strategies among children and young adults. The latter would be a particularly useful approach to reduce the stroke burden, because changes in health practices are most effective, when initiated early, prior to the manifestation of subclinical risk factors. In a rapidly changing world, involvement of young stroke physicians in organizational work is likely to promote new channels, such as Facebook and blogs, which may increase stroke awareness. Also the importance of stroke and stroke prevention at young ages is likely better communicated by young stroke physicians who the patients can relate to. On top of that, young generations should get involved in stroke prevention and stroke care for socioeconomic reasons, because they will pay the rising costs for the stroke burden in an ageing population with an increasing stroke prevalence.

Our own involvement in the *ESO YSP Committee*

The *European Stroke Organization (ESO) Young Stroke Physicians (YSP) Committee* represents junior stroke physicians and researchers in Europe particularly for clinical, research, and career purposes. The committee is run by young ESO members approved by the ESO Executive Committee and is currently composed of a chair and 9 members. Our primary aim is to increase the participation and influence of young stroke physicians and researchers in Europe. This is achieved by inviting young colleagues to participate at the

ESOC and by organizing for example a special career-mentoring workshop in which young stroke physicians get the opportunity to meet leading stroke experts, present their proposals for new studies and get feedback and advice on how to improve the study design to make it successful. In addition, our team tries to get “rising stars” invited for the scientific program. We have implemented a department-to-department visiting program, which allows young stroke physicians to gather experiences and skills in other countries’ clinics and laboratories, thus supporting the international exchange of clinical and scientific knowledge. We meet annually at the *ESOC* and occasionally during other stroke meetings. Beyond, we are in contact by e-mail, social media and telephone conferences. Through our ESO activities, we were able to create our own networks early on. Moreover, involvement in ESO gives us inspiration and the opportunity to at least partly influence stroke care in Europe. And finally, we all agree that it is a pleasure to meet and collaborate with like-minded young colleagues from different countries. Get involved, have fun and remember that your voice matters too.

Committee members: Diana Aguinar de Sousa (Portugal), Linxin Li (United Kingdom), Xabier Urrea (Spain), Jonathan Coutinho (The Netherlands), Nicolas Martinez-Majander (Finland), Milija Mijajlovic (Serbia), Peter Vanacker (Belgium), Antje Schmidt (Germany), Mira Katan (Switzerland)

Chair: Else Charlotte Sandset (Norway)

Author contributions: AS wrote the first draft of the manuscript. MK and ECS critically revised the manuscript.

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